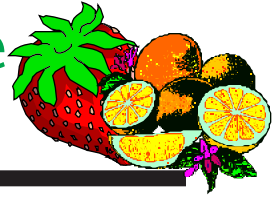




# San Diego Agriculture

## Not Your Average Farm



**Different.** That's what San Diego agriculture is.

In many parts of the country the word farm brings to mind rich soil, large acreages, plentiful water, and green fields. But in San Diego the word farm often means poor soil, small acreages and scarce water.

And it works here! San Diego agriculture is a billion-dollar industry, the fourth largest in the county. In fact San Diego agriculture is so vibrant that it ranks 10th in the nation for the value of agricultural products sold.

What makes San Diego farming different and why is it so successful?

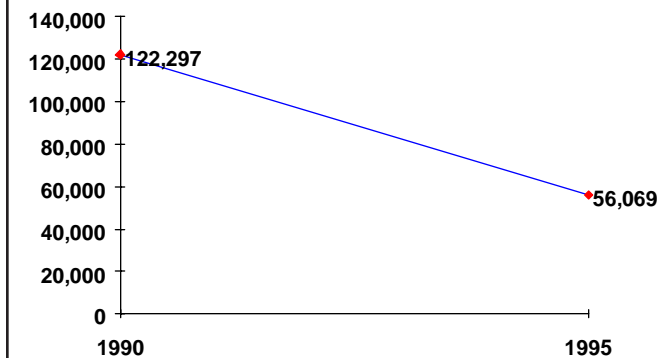
Water, climate, the soil, the size, the differing topography—all make San Diego's farms unique from their counterparts throughout California and the country.

**Poor Soil.** San Diego farmers have prospered despite the poor soils characteristic of this county. Only about six percent of the county's soils are considered prime for agricultural use, and some of that acreage is already urbanized or unsuitable for other reasons. As a result, most of the existing agricultural use occurs in non-prime soils. Much of the soil here is considered of poor quality because the terrain is steep and the soil is errodible.

**Expensive Water.** Ask a San Diego farmer what the highest cost on the farm is, and the answer is likely to be "water." San Diego growers pay some of the highest prices in the State for imported water. Although some parts of the county have ample groundwater supplies, many farmers must rely on water that is piped in from the Colorado River and Northern California—and that water is expensive. In fact, agricultural water rates in the County Water Authority are more than 30 times those of the Central Valley Project or Imperial Irrigation District. As a consequence, San Diego growers can not compete with other counties in growing water-intensive crops like alfalfa and Sudan hay, two of the largest crops grown in neighboring Imperial County, where water is cheap.

If you want to farm in San Diego County the high cost of water makes irrigation efficiency one of your top priorities. San Diego farmers are known statewide for their low-

TABLE 1:  
San Diego County  
Agricultural Water Use  
in Acre Feet



use irrigation methods and their ability to grow crops with the least amount of water. The county's level of efficiency is extremely high when compared to other agricultural areas in California and has increased over the past five years. While the value of agriculture continues to rise steadily, agricultural water use has fallen from its peak in 1990, at 122,297 acre-feet, to just 56,069 acre-feet in 1995.

**Climate.** San Diego shares its latitude with Bermuda, Shanghai and Casablanca. Combine that location with the warm Pacific Ocean waters and you have one of the most temperate regions in the world. With an average annual temperature of 63.2 degrees and sunshine 70 percent of the time, San Diego has the ideal climate to live and raise many crops. And there are many sub-climates within the county. While most growing seasons here tend to be long, in some parts of the county the season is year-round. Some weather stations along the coast have never recorded a freezing temperature!

Moderate coastal temperatures make it ideal for raising indoor nursery products, keeping cooling and heating costs down. Encinitas is home to many nursery and flower growers, including Ecke Ranch, world-renowned for its poinsettias. Head northeast from there and you will find many of our avocado groves in Fallbrook and a variety of citrus and other orchard crops in Valley Center. A quick trip south takes you to the spectacular views of the San Pasqual Valley, where

growers raise everything from citrus to strawberries. Apples in the mountains of Julian will mark your trip east, just before you drop down into the seemingly inhospitable desert and its successful citrus operations. With its many microclimates and farming areas, San Diego growers raise more than 100 different crops and commodities throughout the region.

**Small But Numerous.** You may have driven right by a farm in San Diego County without even noticing it. That's because our farms are small. Of the 6,565 farms in the county, 4,298 of them, or 65%, are nine or fewer acres. Ninety percent are 49 or fewer acres. In fact, we have the second highest number of farms in the country and the highest number of small farms! The number of small farms in San Diego County is increasing, from 3,522 in 1982 to 4,298 in

TABLE 2:  
San Diego County Farms  
By Size

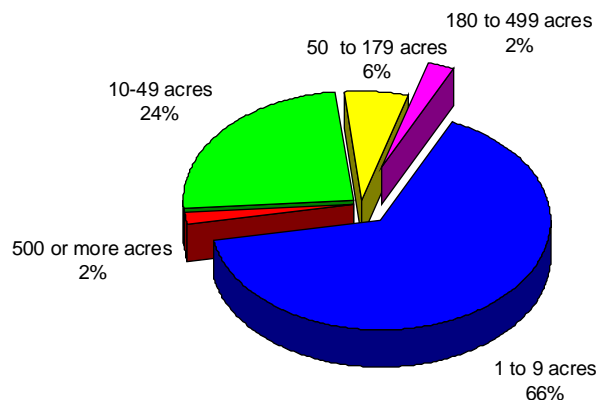


TABLE 3:  
Average Farm Size  
California & San Diego County

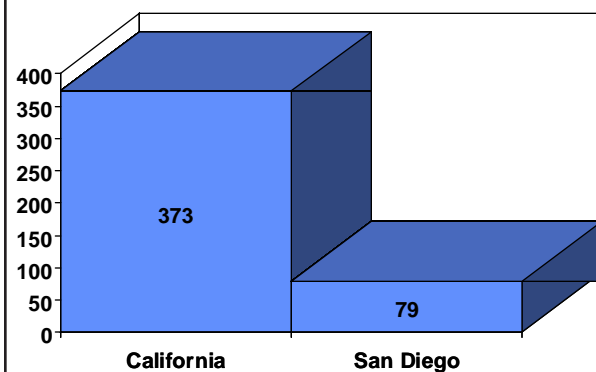
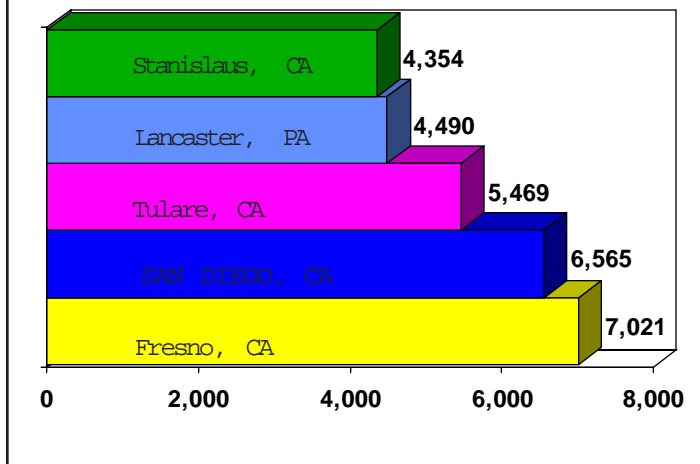


TABLE 4:  
U.S. Counties with the  
Most Farms



1992. While our farms are growing in number, they are getting smaller--from an average of 101 acres in 1982 to 79 in 1992. That's less than one-quarter of the statewide average farm size of 373 acres.

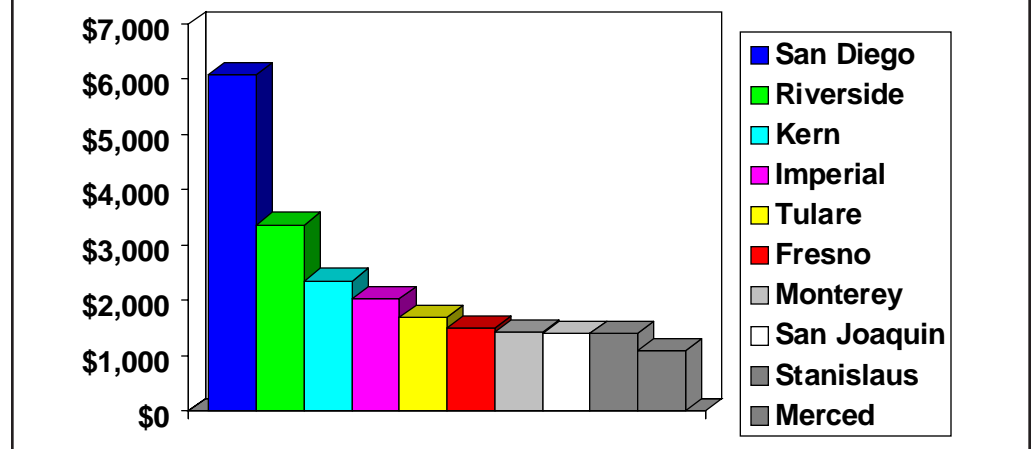
**Urbanized.** The City of San Diego is California's second largest city and the nation's sixth. The county's population is increasing, surpassing 2.7 million people and placing it fourth in counties in the nation. This number includes the residents of 18 incorporated cities as well as a large

unincorporated area. Land prices are high and soil conditions are sometimes poor. Although it might not seem like the ideal place to grow some crops, San Diego farmers have specialized in integrating agricultural activity and urban living. Farmers grow crops with a high dollar value per acre, like nursery products and flowers, so they don't need hundreds of acres to make a living. As Table 5 shows, San Diego far surpasses its fellow top-ten producing counties in terms of average dollar value per acre. And compare San Diego's agricultural production to other urbanized areas of California, such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, and you will find it is more valuable than both of those counties combined.

#### Marketed Locally.

While San Diego growers do a great business exporting their products to other places, many of the fresh fruits and vegetables grown in the County stay here, ending up on the local dinner plate. San Diego has 24 certified farmers markets where growers can sell their produce, not to mention dozens of roadside stands and "you pick" farms. In fact, San Diego ranks 19th nationally among counties in the value of products sold at farmstands, farmer's markets and other places where the products bought will be directly consumed.

TABLE 5:  
Dollar Value Per Acre of  
California's Top Agricultural Producing Counties  
(1995)



**Nationally Significant.** San Diego is nationally ranked in many of the crops that it grows. Among counties in the United States, San Diego ranks:

1 <sup>st</sup>	in value of nursery and greenhouse crops, mushrooms and sod sold.	9 <sup>th</sup>	in pounds of grapefruit produced.
1 <sup>st</sup>	in number of small farms.	10 <sup>th</sup>	in value of crops sold, including nursery and greenhouse crops.
	in avocado acreage and production.	16 <sup>th</sup>	in value of fruits, nuts and berries sold.
2 <sup>nd</sup>	in number of farms.	17 <sup>th</sup>	in net cash return from agricultural sales.
6 <sup>th</sup>	in market value of land and buildings.	19 <sup>th</sup>	in the value of products sold at farmstands, farmer's markets and other direct consumption outlets.
6 <sup>th</sup>	in the number of horses and ponies inventoried.	19 <sup>th</sup>	in the amount of land in orchards.
7 <sup>th</sup>	in hens and pullets of laying age inventoried.	19 <sup>th</sup>	in pounds of oranges produced.
8 <sup>th</sup>	in the number of chickens (3 months or older) inventoried.	20 <sup>th</sup>	in market value of agricultural products sold.
8 <sup>th</sup>	in pounds of strawberries harvested for sale.	28 <sup>th</sup>	in value of vegetables, sweet corn and melons sold.

**Constantly Changing.** In 1927, the first year statistics were available, San Diego growers farmed a little more than 97,000 acres, with 64,500 of those acres planted in field crops. The population was on the rise, reaching 209,659 by 1930, an increase of 87% from 1920. The most valuable crops produced were lemons, canning tomatoes, celery, alfalfa hay, table grapes and navel oranges. The entire cut flower production was estimated to have a value of just \$1,000. Farming in San Diego today is vastly different. Growers now cultivate more than 169,000 acres of land. Hay is one of the county's least valuable crops, and table grapes do not even appear in recent crop reports. As markets and farming conditions have changed, so have the kinds of crops grown. Instead of celery, herbs are now one of the most valuable vegetable crop grown here. And from that inauspicious beginning, San Diego's nursery and flower production has prospered and currently accounts for more than 60% of the County's agricultural value.

**A Thriving Industry.** San Diego agriculture is clearly a successful industry and vital to the region's economy. Can it remain that way, considering the many pressures placed on the county's farmers? Weather and pest infestation will always pose some threat. In addition, this year's ruling by USDA to allow the importation of Mexican avocados may affect San Diego's industry. But based on past performances, the future looks bright. San Diego agriculture has posted an increase in value in eight of the past ten years and has shown an overall increase of 94% during that same period. The county's domination in the production of nursery products, flowers and foliage is extensive, with local growers producing more than 30% of the state's total value. Take flowers and foliage alone and the figure is staggering--almost 46% of the state's production. Growers continue to explore new markets, such as herbs and other gourmet products. Although the agricultural industry will probably change in the next century to meet what ever demands are placed upon it, it is likely to be successful and to remain an integral part of San Diego's character and economy.